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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000812

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: RED CROSS HOSTAGES: PURSUING NEGOTIATIONS, BUT
PREPARING FOR WORST

REF: A. MANILA 727: AUTHORITIES SECURE RELEASE OF ONE
ICRC HOSTAGE

[1](#)B. MANILA 703: GOVERNMENT REJECTS TERRORISTS DEMANDS

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney; Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Philippine government is continuing efforts to negotiate the safe release of the two remaining International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) workers abducted January 15 by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists. Government officials underscored that force would only be used as a last resort, but as the crisis entered its fourth month, Philippine military and police special forces stepped up efforts to locate and isolate the kidnappers in case the last-ditch talks fall apart. Muslim religious leaders met with the lead ASG kidnapper, and succeeded in passing medicine to one hostage, but failed to win the release of either kidnap victim. Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo on April 17 outlined to Ambassador the government's frustration at lack of progress in negotiations, as the armed forces chief requested continued U.S. intelligence assistance to pinpoint the hostages' location. The Ambassador urged Secretary Romulo and other officials to make every effort to ensure the safety of the hostages. END SUMMARY.

NO RANSOM, NO WITHDRAWAL

[1](#)2. (U) Although ASG terrorists released Filipina ICRC hostage Mary Jean Lacaba on April 2 (reftel A), two other ICRC workers kidnapped January 15 on Jolo Island, Andreas Notter of Switzerland and Italian Eugenio Vagni, remain in the hands of the ASG. As the Philippine military's "tactical pause" for the Easter holiday entered its second week, local and national officials continued their efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the hostage crisis, most recently enlisting the aid of local Muslim clerics to talk with the ASG terrorists who are moving around the island of Jolo to evade Philippine security forces. In an April 16 discussion on the margins of opening ceremonies for the 2009 Balikatan bilateral military exercise, AFP Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Alexander Yano told acting DCM that five Ulama (Muslim clerics) had been engaged for several days with the ASG kidnappers on behalf of the hostages, but had failed to win their release. But Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno on April 16 cited as a "breakthrough" the ASG's apparent willingness to allow the Ulama to pass on medicine for 62-year-old Italian hostage Eugenio Vagni, who is reportedly suffering from a hernia. Puno optimistically offered that there was hope so long as communication continued.

13. (C) In an April 17 breakfast meeting with Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo, the Ambassador stressed U.S. concern for the safety of the hostages, and urged the government to move with utmost caution and care if it became necessary to rescue the hostages from imminent harm. Secretary Romulo expressed frustration at the lack of progress in negotiations for the hostages' release, and said that the government was studying "every available option." That sentiment was echoed by General Yano, who stated unequivocally that the Philippine government would continue to explore every available avenue to resolve the crisis peacefully, but was nevertheless preparing other options in the event negotiations failed to produce results. Yano requested additional U.S. intelligence assistance that would permit the AFP to locate and track the hostages and their kidnappers.

"PARTNERS IN COUNTERTERRORISM"

14. (C) In a further reflection of the deep frustration on the part of the government, Secretary of National Defense Gilbert Teodoro reiterated the Philippine government's policy of no ransom payments for hostages. Calling the kidnapping of the three ICRC workers "a brazen criminal act that will not go unpunished," Teodoro said, "Our policy is crystal clear; our government will not pay ransom, as this will only encourage more abductions in the future." Addressing the continuing threat from the ASG, Teodoro said that the Philippine government is determined to restore law and order in the Sulu Archipelago, and will "bring the Abu Sayyaf Group to

MANILA 00000812 002 OF 002

justice." Secretary Teodoro told the Ambassador that the Philippine government categorically rejected ASG demands that all Philippine troops be pulled back to their barracks in Jolo City, and added that President Arroyo had instructed him to keep the Ambassador apprised of all developments, "since we are partners in the counterterrorism effort" (reftel B).

COMMENT

15. (C) While the Philippine government has shown maximum restraint in pursuing a negotiated solution through a variety of actors, as the hostage crisis enters its fourth month and the health of the hostages continues to deteriorate, key government and military officials now believe they have little choice but to seriously consider a military operation to bring the situation to a swift and final conclusion. Lines of communication remain open, however, and there is yet hope that a military solution will prove unnecessary. Post will remain in close touch with key officials and will continue to emphasize the paramount importance of the safety of the hostages and, once the crisis ends, the need for more sustained and accelerated action to remove the last vestiges of the ASG from Jolo with finality, so that a similar situation does not reoccur.

KENNEY